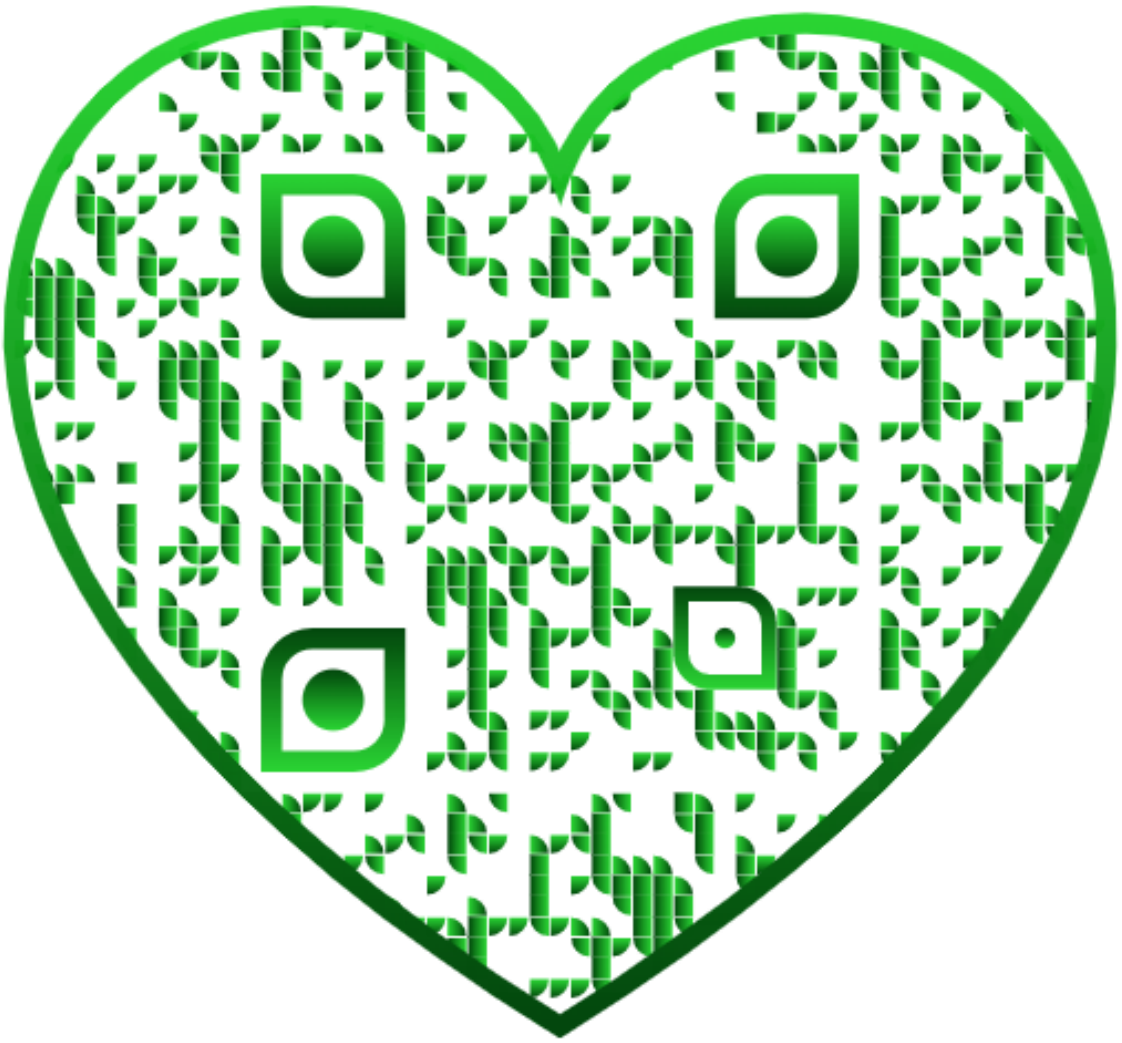
"If it ain't jammin', we're wasting time," says Pantera's Dimebag Darrell.

PHOTO: LISA SHARKEN

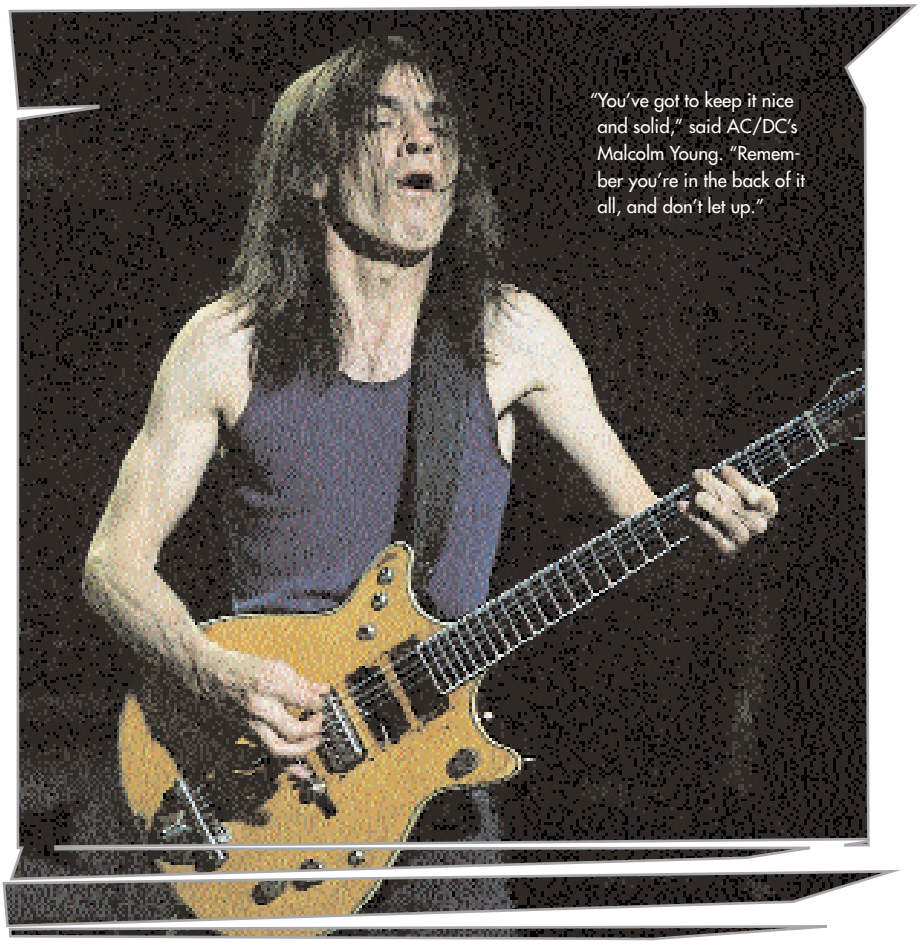


HEAVY FRETTING

GET DOWN AND DIRTY WITH MODERN RIFF MASTERS

Spotlights don't usually fall on rhythm guitarists. It's the lead players who typically get the glory. And why not? The solos are where the drama and dynamics are—from soaring melodies to bluesy splutters to both-hands-on-the-board pyrotechnics. Yet even the most astounding solos rarely incite toe tapping or head banging. No, for sheer physical impact, it's *riffs* that get the crowd rocking. ■ Think about it: Where would rock bands such as Black Sabbath or Led Zeppelin be without the indelible, river-deep riffs of "Iron Man" or "The Ocean"? And guitar-heads might be more prone to rave about Eddie Van Halen's "Eruption," but again, it's his raucous riffs ("Unchained," "Hot for Teacher") that put the band on the radio and on MTV in the early and mid '80s. ■ So what makes a riff tick? Why do some have staying power, while others fade away into memoryland? Is there a fool-proof formula for winning riffs? The best way to answer these questions is to dissect the work of some of today's top riff merchants—including a few newbies and some veterans who are still rocking hard. ➤ ➤ ➤

BY ADAM LEVY


"You've got to keep it nice and solid," said AC/DC's Malcolm Young. "Remember you're in the back of it all, and don't let up."

RAVE ON

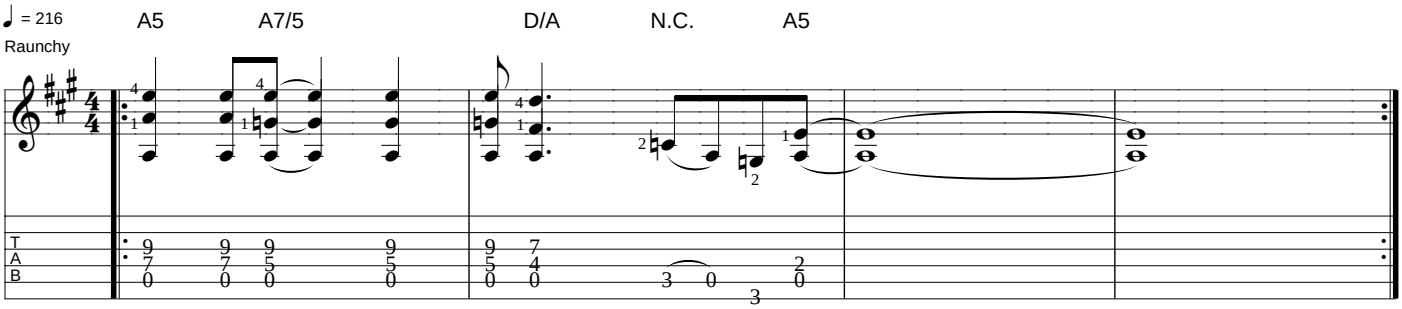
The Living End is a fairly young band, but the band members must have skipped a grade or two at riff college because—in terms of relentless grooves and killer tones—these guys are *way* ahead of the class. Their 1999 album, *The Living End*, displayed their punkabilly roots (perhaps "the Clash meets Reverend Horton Heat" is an apt description). On that album, guitarist Chris Cheney played his brains out—with drop-dead rhythm work and hopped-up solos. On the band's latest release, *Roll On* [Reprise], the rockabilly vibe is toned down, but the power-pop sensibilities have been focused to a laser-like intensity.

Ex. 1, based on the intro of "Riot on Broadway" (from *Roll On*), recalls Bon Scott-era AC/DC, with widespread chords shifting over a tonic pedal. (This example is reminiscent of AC/DC's "Riff Raff" intro.) After a bar-and-a-half of similar motion, the chord-over-bass strategy gives way to a primal *A*-minor-pentatonic move, then settles on a standard-issue *A5* power chord.

Like our first Living End-style tidbit, **Ex. 2** (à la "Don't Shut the Gate," also from *Roll On*) is deceptively simple. It starts off with an *E5* power chord in the bottom range of the guitar. The *E5* works up to *A5* (bar 1, beat four) via a blues-based bend and a pull-off, and eventually climbs up to *B♭5* (downbeat of bar 2). The riff's route back down to home base is less kinetic, but just as effective. The rule here: Keep it simple.

Cheney's tone trip is straight-ahead: Gretsch guitars (usually a White Falcon or a Duo Jet) paired with Marshall or Soldano amps yielding a chimey grind similar to that of his Australian compatriots Angus and Malcolm Young of AC/DC. Speaking of them . . .

Ex. 1



Ex. 2

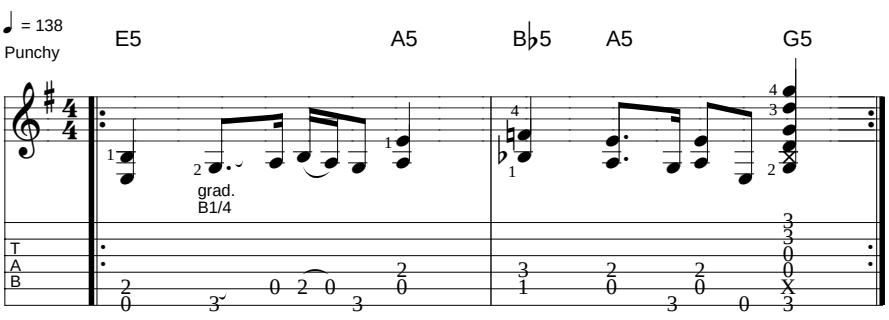


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PHOTO: STEVE JENNINGS

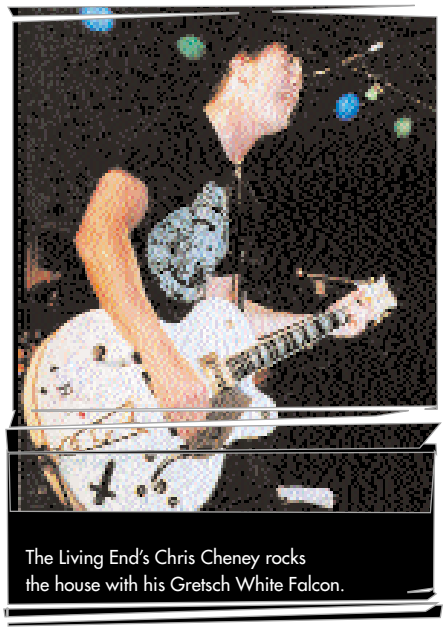
THE THUNDER FROM DOWN UNDER

AC/DC is no newcomer to the riff trade. The powerhouse Aussie quintet—led by sibling guitarists Angus and Malcolm Young—has been hard at work since the mid 1970s, tooling such radio-friendly rockers as "Highway to Hell" and "You Shook Me All Night Long." The band has no plans to retire anytime soon, and their latest disc, *Stiff Upper Lip* [Elektra], shows they haven't lost any of their infamous edge.

This little beauty (**Ex. 3**) was inspired by the intro from *Stiff Upper Lip*'s title cut. Like many of AC/DC's guitar hooks, this one has a playful vibe, but it means business. Let's take a look at the key elements. The downbeat of bar 1 is anticipated by a tied-over eighth-note pickup, and beat three of the same bar is also jumped by an eighth-note tie. These anticipations provide a sense of drive. Another point of interest here is the low, pedal-tone *A* that rides below most of the riff. It, too, gets the horses under the hood galloping—and the wide gaps between the low *A*s and the higher melody notes on the first and second strings add an expansive quality. The triads in bar 2 (*D* on the *and* of beat one, *C* on beat three) are a sweet contrast to the bluesier material in bar 1.

To get yourself properly tuned into the AC/DC zone, play this example on a humbucker-loaded solidbody (Malcolm Young's fave is a '63 Gretsch Jet Firebird; Angus plays Gibson SGs), with a modicum of Marshall-style grind. Optional: Bob your head with reckless abandon.

PUTTING THE "HARM" IN HARMONY



The Living End's Chris Cheney rocks the house with his Gretsch White Falcon.

Opeth may not be a household name, but the band sure knows how to write 'em—wild power riffs with a few odd harmonic turns, that is. Peter Lindgren and Mikael Åkerfeldt make up the band's two-man guitar army, and on their latest album, *Blackwater Park* [Koch], the pair alternate between arpeggiated acoustic niceties and full-metal-jacket assaults. Some of their most broiling riffage can be heard in "The Leper Affinity," on which **Ex. 4** is based.

These guys aren't afraid of harmonic tension. And they know that one of the easiest ways to sour a power chord is to add its ♭9, which is exactly what happens in bar 1, on the *and* of beat one and the ensuing five eighth-notes. (In this case, the chord is *E5*, and its ♭9 is *F* natural.) The tension gets resolved before the end of bar 1, as *E5* returns sans ♭9, but more acerbic harmonies ensue in bar 2. Beat one features a half-step slide into a tart *Gaug* triad, and the *Gaug* is followed by another augmented triad—*F♯aug*. The slide down from *D* (bar 2, beat four) releases the tension we've built up so far, but the four-note ascent (*E, G, B♭, D*) on beats five and six spells out an *Em7♭5* arpeggio, curdling the harmony once more.

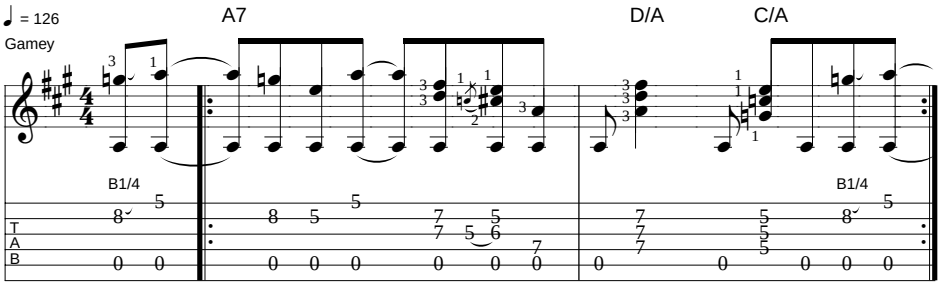
Taking a broader look at the harmony of this example, we notice something particularly interesting. Let's scan the top note of each chord: Atop *E5*, we have *E*. The high note on *E5♭9* is

RIFFIN' IT, OLD SCHOOOL
TEN CLASSICS YOU MUST KNOW

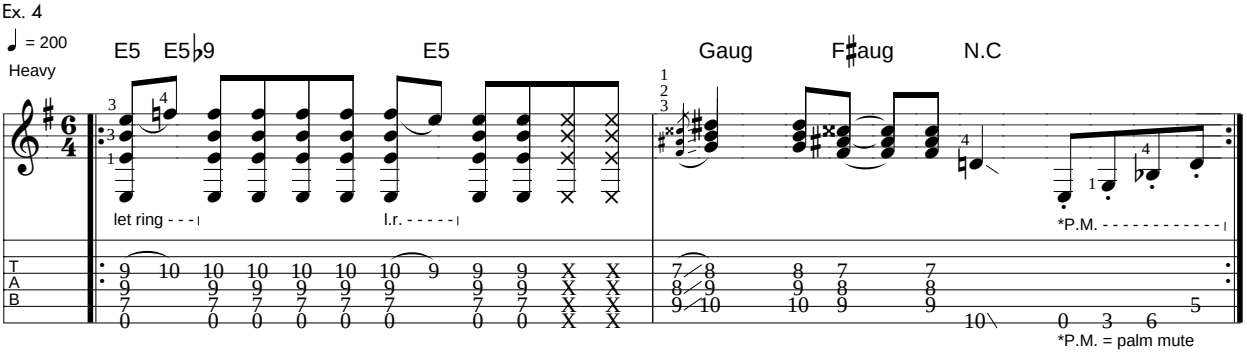
While this lesson focuses on modern-day riffs, going back to the classics is never a bad idea. There are literally thousands of great songs to mine for riffs. If you're new to this territory—or if your long-term memory needs a little refresher—this short list may point you in the right direction for classic riffage. —AL

1. JOHNNY BURNETTE TRIO—"Train Kept a Rollin'"
2. VAN HALEN—"Ain't Talkin' 'Bout Love"
3. THE KINKS—"All Day and All of the Night"
4. AEROSMITH—"Walk This Way"
5. AC/DC—"Back in Black"
6. LED ZEPPELIN—"Heartbreaker"
7. OZZY OSBOURNE—"Crazy Train"
8. THE BEATLES—"Day Tripper"
9. NIRVANA—"Smells Like Teen Spirit"
10. THE METERS—"Cissy Strut"

Ex. 3



Ex. 4



*P.M. = palm mute

PHOTO: RANDY COHEN

F. When *E5* returns, *E* is on top. *D♯* sits atop *Gaug*, and *D* natural (respelled enharmonically as *C* double-sharp) rides *F♯aug*. Strung together, that's *E*, *F*, *E*, *D♯*, *D*—a chromatic climb up and back from the tonic of our key (*E* minor) down to its ♭7 (*D*). This neat bit of voice-leading keeps our tweaky progression from being just a random, dissonant chord sequence.

This example is meant to be played with a touch of grinding distortion, but not too much. When you're dealing with tricky harmonies—anything other than power chords, really—using too much distortion can obscure the intricacies of your chords. (You can read up on Åkerfeldt's tone secrets in this issue's Buzz section.)

ROAD SCHOLARS

Imagine early-era Black Sabbath tunes written from an entirely different lyrical mind set. The minor-pentatonic riffs are still in play and the guitar tones are still fuzzy and treble-free, but in place of Ozzy Osbourne's cabalistic poetry, the lyrics are filled with tales of cruising the streets in a tricked-out van. Getting the picture? Welcome to the world of Fu Manchu.

Nonpoint's Andrew Goldman works his EMG-loaded Les Paul Studio.

Fu Manchu guitarist/songwriter Scott Hill is a master of the bone-simple riff, as **Ex. 5**'s four-bar figure illustrates. Based on "Boogie Van" (from *King of the Road* [Mammoth]), this spacious dropped-*D* item is built from notes of the *D* minor pentatonic scale—*D*, *F*, *G*, *A*, *C* (1, ♭3, 4, 5, ♭7). The inclusion of the *C♯* passing tone between *C* and *D* each time the line ascends and descends adds a bluesy chromaticism reminiscent of Led Zeppelin's "Black Dog" and "Custard Pie" riffs. *Sweet.*

Check out how bars 2 and 4 differ slightly: Bar 2 ends on a low *G*; bar 4 ends on *G* an octave higher. This subtle change makes bars 3 and 4 sound like a "response" to the "call" of bars 1 and 2. Try starting this example on bar 3 for a cool variation. Played this way, the riff's response phrases go up first, then drop down low at the end (bar 2 is now bar 4).

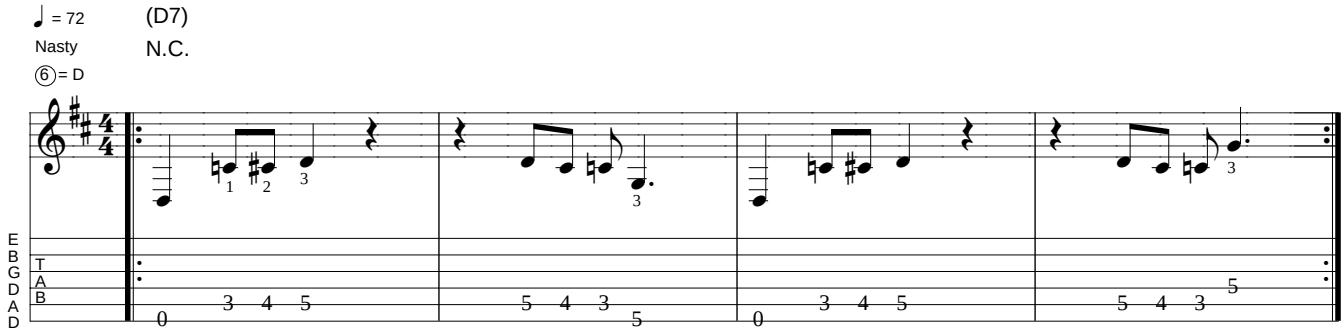
For an appropriately Manchurian tone, run your favorite solidbody through the nearest fuzzbox (preferably a Big Muff) with the pedal's tone knob rolled *way* back.

BOTTOMFEEDERS

Nonpoint is a heavy-rocking foursome of young guns whose guitarist, Andrew Goldman, drives the band's songs with tight, chunky rhythms. Goldman is featured in this month's Buzz section, so turn there for the lowdown on his style and gear.

Let's dig into **Ex. 6**, a fierce figure similar to the one Goldman plays on "Mindtrip." (Note: Goldman tunes *C*, *G*, *C*, *F*, *A*, *D*, bottom to top—but we've written the example in dropped *D*.) This syncopated riff bounces above the drum groove like a speedboat skipping along the water's surface. Check out how in bar 1, the first two-beat phrase starts right on the down-

Ex. 5



Ex. 6

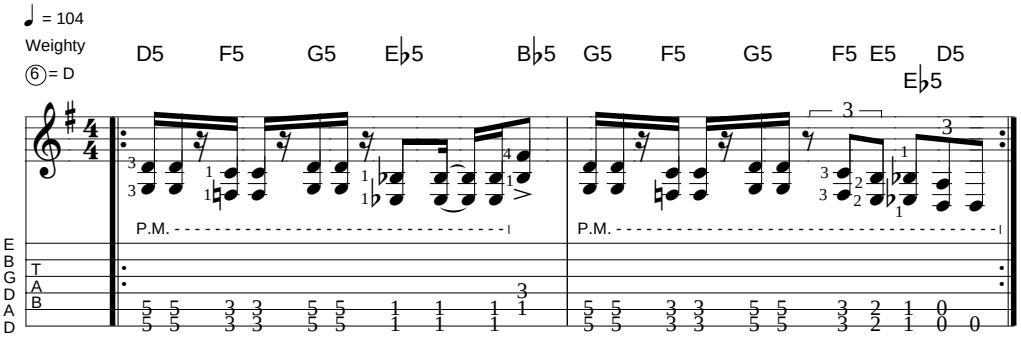


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PHOTO: RANDY COHEN

beat, giving the phrase a strong, rooted feel. The second half of the bar (starting on beat three) begins with a sixteenth-note rest, giving an off-beat feel. We repeat bar 1's first half at the top of bar 2 (returning to more solid rhythmic ground), and then we're in for a surprise on beats three and four: The tight, sixteenth-based rhythms give way to a loping eighth-note-triplet descent. The effect of this groove-lurching maneuver is the rhythmic equivalent of downshifting—and you can feel how it jams the gears a little.

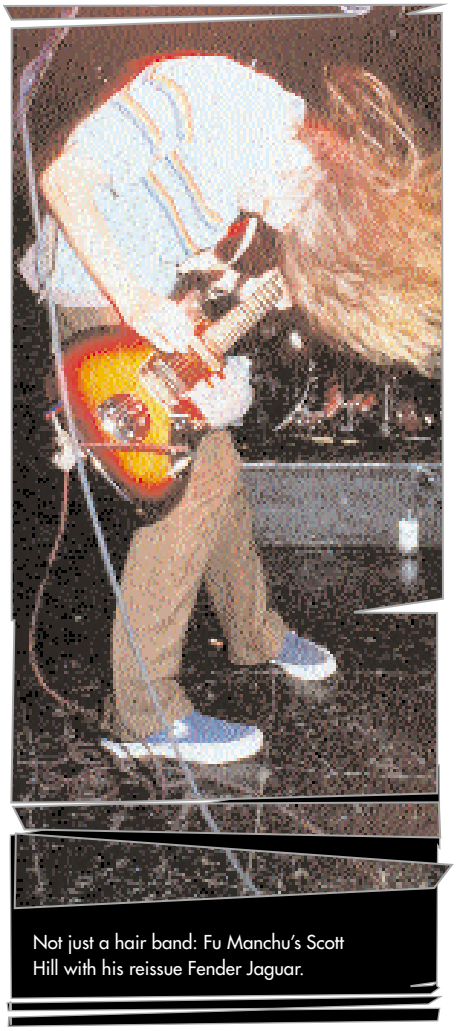
For Nonpoint-approved riffs, call up your favorite bone-crushing tone—then roll the gain back just a bit. While this example *should* sound heavy, too much dirt can cloud the progression. That's definitely something to consider when you're working down in the guitar's lowermost register and changing chords frequently.

DIMEBAGGING

If a picture is truly worth a thousand words, the image of Ace Frehley tattooed on Dimebag Darrell's chest should tell you where Pantera's guitar man is coming from. Although his band's music and image are edgier than anything on Kiss' *Destroyer*, the tenets seems to be more or less the same as those of Frehley and company—if it rocks, it's good, and when in doubt, rock harder.

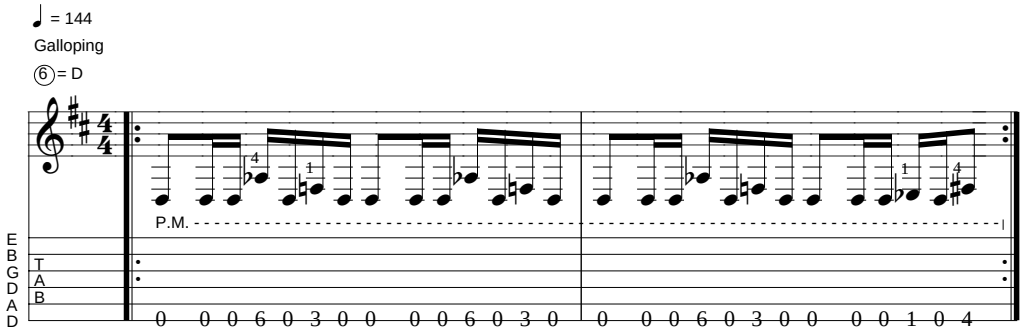
On Pantera's latest release, *Reinventing the Steel* [Elektra], the group continues the tradition of chunk-style metal-rock they established on their breakthrough 1990 album, *Cowboys from Hell*. **Ex. 7**'s galloping figure is in the style of "Yesterday Don't Mean Sh**," from *Reinventing the Steel*. Sort of a demonic version of the James Bond theme, this twisted line sits entirely on the sixth-string (tuned down to *D*). Like many of the riffs in this lesson, this line is somewhat repetitive, and that's part of its charm. The twist comes at the very end—in bar 2, on beat four. Here, the eighth-and-two-sixteenths rhythm used throughout the example is inverted, and two new notes are introduced—*E♭* and *F*. If we put the notes of this riff in sequential order, we have *D*, *E♭*, *F*, *F♯*, and *A♭*. In the key of *D*, that's the root, ♭9, ♯9, 3, and ♭5. Except for the repeated root and the 3 (which only sounds once), it's all altered tones. Now, *that's* the way to create harmonic tension.

This example's fret-hand fingering is also worth noting. Fingers 4 and 1 are used for most of this riff—at the 6th and 3rd frets, respectively. Then, on the fourth beat of bar 2, the fingering



Not just a hair band: Fu Manchu's Scott Hill with his reissue Fender Jaguar.

Ex. 7



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Ex. 8

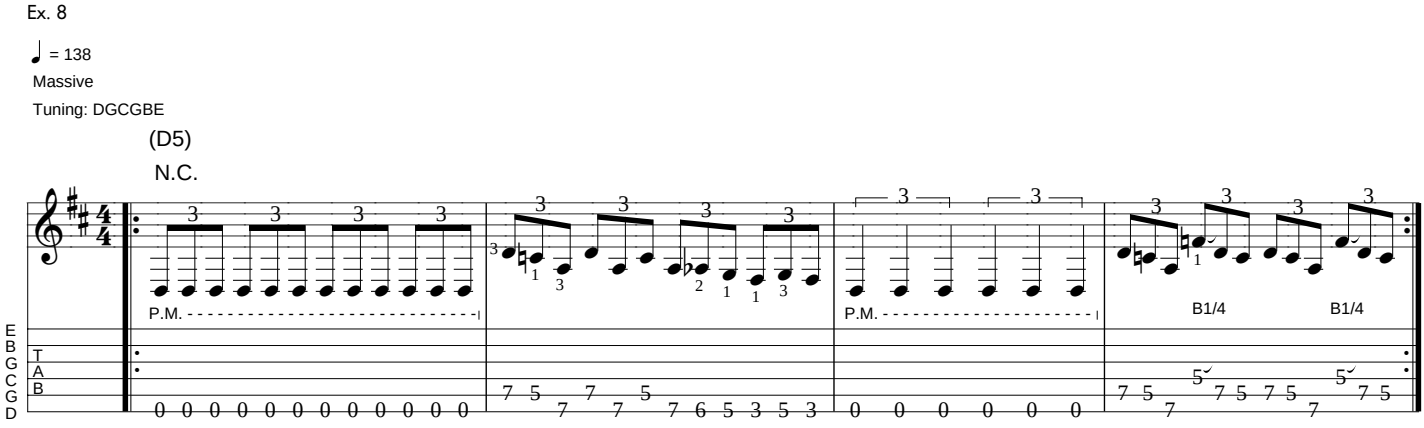

PHOTO: PAUL SLATTERY/RETNA

order is reversed (now 1 and 4) to nail frets 1 and 4. Though a listener may not appreciate the guitaristic "inside joke" at work here, your hand would wink at you if it could.

Our second Pantera-style riff (**Ex. 8**) is based on the main line from "Revolution Is My Name"—also from *Reinventing the Steel*. This little ditty nicely illustrates Darrell's unique blend of chunky speed-metal fervor and classic-rock vibe. It's played on the bottom three strings, all of which are tuned a whole-step below standard pitch (*E* down to *D*, *A* down to *G*, *D* down to *C*). You may want to tune all six of your guitar's strings down, but that's not necessary since you won't be using your treble strings.

Triplet rhythms are the backbone here. As with several of the other examples we've explored, the call-and-response element is key. Bar 1 is the basic "call," and bar 2's "response" is a cool sequence built from the *D* blues scale. (For reference, that's *D, F, G, A♭, A, C*.) Bar 3 calls again, with a quarter-note-triplet variation on bar 1's eighth-note-triplet figure. Bar 4's answer paraphrases bar 2, with bluesy, bent *F* naturals on beats two and four.

If you're looking to muster up a tone similar to Darrell's, go for a hard-edged, high-gain approach. (For the record, Darrell uses his Washburn signature models—based on the classic Dean ML design—and solid-state Randall amps.)

RIFF TO THE FUTURE

Hopefully, this lesson has opened your eyes, ears, and fingers to some new riffing possibilities. If you want to take this lesson further, try writing your own variations on each riff. Ask yourself, "If this is the song's opener, what would sound good in the next section?" Another approach is to keep one of the example's rhythmic elements intact while changing most or all of the pitches. (For instance, Example 5's *D* blues line could be reworked into a *G* Lydian or *E♭* minor line.) Of course, you can always start from scratch—just pick up your guitar, crank into your favorite tuning, dial up a righteous tone, and go for it. Rock on.